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Education, power and segregation. Psychoeducational evaluation as an obstacle to Inclusive Education

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Summary

Proposal Information/Research/Questions and Theoretical Approach

Some 25 years after the publication of the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994), and 11 years after the ratification of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN 2006), the Educational System in Spain continues to violate the right to an inclusive, high-quality education. This statement is based on the Report made by the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2017) and on a research project carried out at the University of Malaga (Calderón, 2018). Institutionalised exclusion exists in the majority of Spanish schools, as shown the testimonies collected as a part of our research: <https://bit.ly/2OYREGL> [accessed 30 November 2019].

The segregated schooling system in Spain is based on the psychoeducational reports made by school counsellors. The education authorities use these reports to decide whether a given student may stay in an ordinary classroom or not. This inertia leads many children to be irremediably segregated in schools. Nevertheless, the empirical basis provided by specialised methods for particular categories of students has shown that there is little support for a separate special needs pedagogy (Ainscow, Dyson & Weiner, 2014; Hehir et al., 2016).

As we proposed elsewhere (Calderón & Habegger, 2018; Calderón & Calderón, 2016; Calderón & Ruiz, 2016), schools use their power to legitimise and justify segregation and its resulting inequities to such an extent that individuals are ultimately subjectified by them. This biopower (Foucault, 2008) endows public discourse with greater legitimacy, as subjects become an active participating agents in the categorisation carried out by the institution. In this way, victims start to feel that the situation is their fault and thus the stigmatising discourse of the school is uncritically internalised (Calderón & Ruiz, 2015).

This paper is the result of the previous research and of the work of a group of activists who are exploring new approaches to school counselling to combat segregation in order to improve the situation of children in the Spanish education system. It focuses on psychoeducational evaluations as a key tool to legitimise segregation and shows how deconstructing them could provide new, effective ways to struggle for inclusive education as part of a humanistic and revolutionary project.

Methods

In February 2018, approximately 100 people from all over Spain took part in a workshop held at the University of Malaga as part of a research project focused on emerging narratives about inclusive schools. This project aimed to collect accounts of experiences from activist families and professionals who are committed to making schools inclusive. These activists unravelled a systematic violation of many children's right to education solely due to their disability.

The session was part of a wider participatory action research process. It carried out and systematically recorded by a research team from the University of Málaga, and the discussions on the attendees' experiences were streamed. The study was involved plenary meetings and workshops with small groups, one for every node that emerged from the larger meetings. Participants developed their own categorisations, found rationales for the situations in schools and provided proposals for interpretation and actions of resistance.

Conclusion and Findings, Scientific Significance

The labels created by psychoeducation evaluations give the impression that they can inform on what a person is like, without actually providing true knowledge about that person, and exercising social control over the person. One of the participant mothers even argued that her son Nico 'did not exist' in those evaluations; that the description provided was not Nico (Mother 1). The label prevented the person from being, and it also hindered everyone else from establishing a non-oppressive relationship with them.

The testimonies collected show how psychoeducational evaluations fail to meet a prerequisite of the right to education, which is actual presence in the process. Psychoeducational evaluations are therefore somewhat paradoxical, they are standardised institutional protocols to meet the challenges of diversity regulated by low-level regulations, but they contradict higher-level national legislation, which equates the right to education with the right to inclusive education (UN, 2006).

School counselling is often reduced in practice to the task of diagnosing children by applying a medical rehabilitation model, which points out the negative aspects, and thus legitimises the segregation of certain children who deviate from the norm. Schools also are using labels in order to look for resources (Headteacher 1): 'looking for children to match the resources and not finding resources for the children' (Counsellor 3).

Empowerment comes from a change of perspective not mediated by labels, which makes it possible to question 'that we are very different from those who are normal' (Mother 4) and encourages people to challenge practices that are ethically questionable.

Abstract

This paper is the result of previous research and of the work of a group of activists who are exploring new approaches to school counselling to both combat segregation and improve the situation of children in the Spanish education system. It focuses on psychoeducational evaluations as a key tool to legitimise segregation and shows how deconstructing them could provide new, effective ways to struggle for inclusive education as part of a humanistic and revolutionary project.

The data came from 100 people from all over Spain who were involved in a workshop within a research project entitled 'Emerging Narratives about Inclusive Schools Based on the Social Model of Disability: Resistance, Resilience and Social Change'. The project's purpose is to gather accounts of experiences from activist families and professionals who strive to make schools inclusive. The study was carried out in meetings and workshops held with small groups. Participants developed their own categorisations, found rationales for the situation in schools, and made proposals for interpretation and actions of resistance.

The data obtained indicated that the labels created by the use of the medical approach adopted by psychoeducational evaluations limits the knowledge about the persons and imposes a strong social control by preventing the collective construction of educational spaces. These tools are largely used in school counselling. They emphasise negative aspects and are singled out as the only means to obtain resources, thereby granting institutional legitimacy to segregated schooling, despite the fact that they undermine the fundamental human right to an inclusive education.

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